



# Office of Inspector General U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

# At a Glance

22-E-0049  
June 23, 2022

## Why We Did This Evaluation

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Inspector General conducted this evaluation in an effort to determine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic—that is, the SARS-CoV-2 virus and resultant COVID-19 disease—on long-term cleanups at Superfund National Priorities List sites. We sent surveys to 457 remedial project managers in February 2021 and received 279 responses, a 61-percent response rate. We also interviewed EPA regional Superfund and Emergency Management Division directors, as well as directors from EPA headquarters.

The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability [Act](#), informally called Superfund, authorizes the EPA to oversee the cleanup of contaminated sites. The National Priorities List identifies the worst hazardous waste sites that warrant further investigation and cleanup.

### **This evaluation supports an EPA mission-related effort:**

- *Cleaning up and revitalizing land.*

### **This evaluation addresses a top EPA [management challenge](#):**

- *Integrating and leading environmental justice, including communicating risks.*

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## ***The Coronavirus Pandemic Caused Schedule Delays, Human Health Impacts, and Limited Oversight at Superfund National Priorities List Sites***

### **What We Found**

The coronavirus pandemic caused schedule delays and changed or extended the exposure of human health and ecological receptors to hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants at 31 Superfund National Priorities List, or NPL, sites. The pandemic also prolonged such human health and environmental exposures, as well as contributed to disproportionate impacts on some communities. Furthermore, some communities that do not use or cannot access electronic communications were unable to participate in community-involvement activities. Conversely, the pandemic did steer some positive changes, such as improved health and safety protocols, increased community participation in virtual meetings, and reduced EPA travel costs. Also, as of our February 2021 survey, there were no known impacts to cleanup costs at a large majority of Superfund NPL sites.

**Coronavirus pandemic restrictions delayed work and limited on-site oversight, with disproportionate impacts to some communities.**

The remedial project managers, or RPMs, responding to our survey said that their oversight of Superfund NPL site work was limited, in part, by the EPA's pandemic-related restrictions, even while some contractors and other parties responsible for cleanup were able to continue work. Further, some regional managers were unable to deploy RPMs to perform nonemergency yet mission-critical work without undergoing a burdensome, undocumented process to obtain headquarters approval for the provision of coronavirus testing and supplies. RPMs were deployed to assist with emergency responses, however.

Most pandemic impacts we identified were caused by social-distancing requirements and site-access limitations, such as EPA travel restrictions and local stay-at-home orders. Other impacts were caused by the EPA's change to virtual modes of communication. Also, at the time of our regional management interviews, the EPA lacked updated guidance that was consistent with an executive order related to providing coronavirus testing and vaccines.

### **Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions**

We made three recommendations to improve community involvement, Superfund site oversight, and safe deployment of RPMs during a pandemic or other emergency. Based on additional information provided by the Agency in its response to the draft report, we revised Recommendation 1. We agreed with the Agency's proposed corrective action for Recommendation 3, which is resolved. Recommendations 1 and 2 are unresolved with resolution efforts underway. We updated our report as appropriate based on the EPA's technical comments.